

Roll Call, March 8, 2004

House Republican leaders are discussing how they might use a series of recently unveiled spending reform proposals as leverage to drum up support for the fiscal 2005 budget resolution.

The discussions are still in their nascent stages, and no decisions will be made until after the Budget Committee marks up the spending blueprint this week. Panel Chairman Jim Nussle (R-Iowa) briefed his colleagues on the budget's details last week.

Several Republican Members and aides said that brainstorming sessions had already begun on how the leadership can attract the support necessary for passage. A firm promise to move a package of budget reform proposals could help persuade recalcitrant deficit hawks to vote in favor of the budget, though such a move also carries the risk of alienating members of the Appropriations Committee.

"We'd like to have it be part of the solution to getting to 218 votes," said Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), a leading reform proponent.

Any reform package would likely be modeled after the list of "12 Consensus Principles to Reduce Spending" recently agreed upon and released by the moderate Tuesday Group and the conservative Republican Study Committee.

Those principles were negotiated chiefly by centrists Kirk and Rep. Mike Castle (R-Del.) and conservative Reps. Jeb Hensarling (R-Texas) and Paul Ryan (R-Wis.). They include automatic spending reductions, so-called PAYGO rules and other mechanisms that proponents argue would make it easier for Congress to reduce the deficit.

At a recent GOP Conference meeting, Majority Whip Roy Blunt (Mo.) held up a list of the 12 principles and said they were excellent ideas. Blunt has discussed the reform proposals with a variety of Republican lawmakers, including Nussle.

While some of the principles espoused by the two groups could be written into the budget resolution itself, others would likely move in a separate package.

Hensarling and Ryan have already introduced their own budget reform bill that includes some of the same proposals contained in the list agreed upon by conservatives and moderates. Kirk said the compromise package has been written into bill form but the timing of its introduction has not yet been decided.

None of the principles espoused by the RSC and the Tuesday Group is a new idea. Nussle himself has long been a proponent of a variety of budget reform proposals.

"He has always thought it would be a good thing to revive the spending enforcement mechanisms that have expired and would like to get them back on the books as soon as possible," said Nussle spokesman Sean Spicer.

The Appropriations Committee, meanwhile, is watching the reform proposals carefully. Any freestanding reform bill would get referral to the spending panel, which would likely seek to eliminate provisions that reduce appropriators' flexibility.

Appropriations spokesman John Scofield said the committee's preference was for the budget to set overall spending numbers and then let Appropriations determine how best to meet those targets.

"The more they muck around the more problems they create for us," Scofield said.